

A SURE FOUNDATION

resources for the relationship
between pastors and congregations

SOCIAL MEDIA GUIDELINES

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theological grounding

The United Church of Christ professes a belief in God who is defined by relationship in the Trinity, who values interconnectedness and calls us to relationships of health and wholeness. The United Church of Christ affirms and values the covenants that exist between God and creation, among family members and communities, and between ministers and those with whom they minister. Those covenants help us to participate in relationships that are rooted in integrity, wholeness, and care, to the glory of God.

A synonym for “pastor” is “parson,” from the same root as “person.” Spiritually grounded pastors understand themselves as embodying whole, authentic and integrated personhood, and strive to be the same person online that they are in other spaces. Guidelines for social media consumption and participation mirror a minister’s personal rule for life and are in concert with the UCC Ministerial Code. While the Code is specific to those with ministerial standing in the United Church of Christ, they have value for all persons who have paid or volunteer roles in congregations as well as the wider church, particularly if they minister to children and youth.

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expectations of a pastor’s online presence

Social media is a form of communication used for connection, relationship, conversation, advocacy, evangelism, debate, news and information, and a means of seeking and offering

support. It may not be everyone's preferred form of communication, but it is an important method, and it is expected that most ministers can and will utilize social media in their ministries in ways that enhance ministry, enrich lives, and reflect individual and organizational values.

At the same time, the 24/7 "always on" nature of social media creates expectations about the accessibility of ministers, what news and information they receive via social media, and what constitutes confidential spaces. Some of those expectations may be reasonable; many, however, are implicit and will need to be named in order to evaluate their appropriateness for any particular ministry setting.

Pastors must consider the boundary implications of their use of social media. What weight is given to the words shared by a pastor? What authority is assumed, and how can that authority best be stewarded? What care is needed to avoid or minimize any harmful use of power by the authorized minister on social media, even if unintentional? Who controls the information shared on social media? Whose story is it to tell, and when or how is it appropriate to share beyond its original audience? Do congregational policies regarding transparency provide for periodic review of the pastor's social media interactions, to ensure both confidentiality and appropriate behaviors?

Questions of confidentiality must be weighed against mandated reporting requirements and liability considerations. While decisions regarding disclosure of information shared on social media should not be made solely on legal or liability bases, neither can these considerations be ignored. Social media is not considered a private space, and nothing revealed on social media can be construed as confidential.

Guidance for Pastors:

- Pastors as professionals strive to balance authenticity with appropriateness on social media, and maintain healthy boundaries around one's personal and professional spheres. A pastor must exercise care in sharing and speaking on social media, even on personal accounts.
- When and where available, pastors are encouraged to consider creating a personal and a professional account to maintain appropriate boundaries with members of congregations or other members of communities of faith.
- Pastors should have a cohesive and consistent strategy for managing friend/follow requests from congregants and communicate that strategy to the congregation.
- Pastors must remember that social media is not confidential space. Even in "closed" groups or private communications, it is possible for information to be copied and shared in other spaces. Pastors should assume that anything they share on social media may be shared by others, no matter their use of privacy settings.
- At the same time, pastors cannot assume that personal information shared about or by others on social media is public knowledge that can be freely shared by the pastor.

- Those who seek religious or spiritual advice from pastors online (via email, social media, etc.) must be informed that their communication is not confidential. Use of digital communication nullifies confidentiality.
- Before posting online, pastors should consider whether social media is an appropriate place for the message, and whether they would convey this same message in face-to-face conversation with the congregant. Pastors should avoid posting vague messages that invite rumor or speculation.
- A pastor is often considered the voice of the church, and social media content from the pastor may be viewed as church policy or as representing a church position.
- Pastors who manage or co-administrate church-related social media sites must maintain a current list of the pages, groups, forums, and accounts associated with the church, along with passwords and the names of all administrators. This list must be accessible to another member of the church staff or governing body.

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adult-minor relationships on social media[1]

- Youth groups thrive with church-sponsored "closed" but not "hidden" groups in digital spaces. These groups include both youth and adult administrators, and only those known to the group are permitted access to those groups.
- The youth group establishes covenants for its online spaces that govern: what is appropriate and inappropriate content to be placed and displayed in the online group for a youth group; whether or not their social networking site groups are open to parents of current members; and when and how to remove former youth members and adult leaders of youth groups who have aged out or left the group.
- With regard to a congregation's Safe Conduct policies[2], online space should be regulated in similar ways to other church space: there must be more than one adult who administers church-related sites, closed groups, listservs, etc.; adults must minimize private, one-on-one conversations with youth; church leadership should periodically monitor the social media interactions of the adult leaders with minors.
- Any inappropriate material that is not covered by mandatory reporting laws should be deleted from the social networking group or site. Any material that is covered by mandatory

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[1] Adapted from the Connecticut Conference's Internet Safety Guidelines, available at http://www.ctucc.org/internetsafetyguidelines.

[2] Safe Conduct policies can be found here: https://www.insuranceboard.org/safety-resources/safeconduct-workbench/

reporting laws is reported to a pastor or staff member, documented for church records, and then deleted from the social networking group or site.

- Any content that details inappropriate behavior by minors (outside of the bounds of the established covenant) during a church sponsored event or activity is addressed by pastors, other youth workers and parents.
- Parents should be informed that content appearing in youth social media spaces that are not sponsored by the church are not within the purview of pastors, staff, or other leaders. Pastors and youth workers may not participate in any youth social media space that is not sponsored by the church.
- Adults, including pastors, should not initiate "friend"/follow requests on social media to minors and should exercise discretion in accepting/reciprocating such requests.
- When and where available, pastors and other youth workers may choose to create separate personal and professional profiles on networking sites. Pastors are accountable for what is shared in all accounts, personal and professional.
- Pastors and other youth workers (employed or volunteer) who choose to accept friend/follow requests from minors or youth must use all applicable privacy settings to shield youth from age-inappropriate content that may exist within the pastor's or youth worker's profile.
- All youth and adults must be informed that communication sent digitally (email, social media, etc.) is not confidential and may be reported or shared with others if necessary.
- Pastors who work directly with youth are encouraged to establish church-sponsored digital communication groups to maintain contact with youth members. Such groups should include other adult leaders (employed, volunteer, or parents).
- Adults should refrain from initiating one-on-one video chats with youth, and if initiated by youth, include another person, preferably an adult, when possible.
- All transcripts of online text chats, video chats, blogs, or video blogs must be saved when possible.
- Pastors and youth workers must consider the content and nature of any post that will be read by or visible to youth. Pastors and youth workers (employed and volunteer) are often considered the voice of the church, and all such content may be viewed as church policy or as a church opinion.
- The United Church of Christ's Office of General Counsel advises against posting online any pictures that include identifying features (such as faces) of minor children. Pastors and youth workers may only post non-identifying pictures of minor children on church-related social media with written permission of the family. Pastors and youth workers may not post identifying images of minor children on their personal social media pages.
- Pictures or video may only be shared with the express permission of the owner of the image (the copyright holder) to use the image.

boundaries for departure [3]

Prior to their departure from a congregation they've served, pastors should create and share a social media transition plan as part of overall ministry transition, and execute that plan as part of their departure from the church.

This plan should take into account the following recommendations:

- Prior to departure, the pastor will transfer administrator duties for church-related social media spaces and accounts, remove their own administrator status, and share password information to someone else in the congregation who in turn changes the passwords and takes over administrator duties.
- Though difficult, it is recommended as a best practice for the departing pastor to unfriend/unfollow all congregants and others with whom they've had a pastoral relationship, although there may be situations where using restricted lists is appropriate.[4] In making this change to limit their online interactions with former congregants, pastors prioritize the needs of the congregation and incoming ministerial leadership over their own desires to maintain relationships (or the desires of congregants to stay in contact). Pastors must be consistent with all congregants – either unfriend/unfollow everyone from the congregation or move everyone to a restricted list – and they should convey this policy to their congregation as part of their departure plan so there is no confusion.
- Following the end date of their contract, call, or covenant with the congregation, pastors must refrain from providing pastoral care through digital communication. Continuing to provide pastoral care through social media interferes with the ministry of one's successor and is a violation of the UCC Ministerial Code.
- Following a period of 1-3 years, pastors may discern whether they will begin to accept friend requests of former congregants and/or choose to change their privacy settings. They should not initiate friend/follow requests with former congregants, and they must continue to refrain from providing pastoral care to former congregants.

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[3] Includes information from the Connecticut Conference's resource, "Internet Safety Guidelines," available here: http://www.ctucc.org/internetsafetyguidelines

[4] Adam Cleaveland makes compelling arguments for both options here: https://alban.org/archive/pastoral-transitions-in-the-age-of-social-media/

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I grant *[congregation/organization]* the right and a license to reproduce and publish for worldwide electronic and print distribution the identity and/or image of me or my child and, at its sole discretion, to share these names and images with others included, but not limited to, for use in *[congregation/organization]*'s publications and displays, the online news magazine of *[congregation/organization]*, the email newsletter of *[congregation/organization]*, print newsletters and other publications, *[congregation/organization]*'s website and/or other electronic and print forms of media.

I hereby waive any right to inspect or approve the finished photographs or printed or electronic matter that may be used in conjunction with them now or in the future, whether that use is known to me or unknown, and I waive any privacy and publicity interests which me or my child may have in our identities or such images.

I hereby agree to release, defend, and hold harmless *[congregation/organization]* from and against any claims, damages or liabilities arising from or related to the use of the names or images covered by this agreement.

Please check the paragraph below which is applicable to your present situation:
_____ I am 18 years of age or older and I am competent to contract in my own name. I have read this authorization and release before signing below, and I fully understand the contents, meaning and impact of this release. I understand that I am free to address any specific questions regarding this release by submitting those questions in writing prior to signing, and I agree that my failure to do so will be interpreted as a free and knowledgeable acceptance of the terms of this release.
____ I am the parent or legal guardian of the below-named child. I have read this authorization and release before signing below, and I fully understand the contents, meaning and impact of this release. I understand that I am free to address any specific questions regarding this release by submitting those questions in writing prior to signing, and I agree that my failure to do so will be interpreted as a free and knowledgeable acceptance of the terms of this release.

Name (printed, signed, dated) and Address
Name (printed, signed, dated) of parent/legal guardian

SAMPLE PHOTO PERMISSIONS

The owner/copyright holder of the attached photographs/images grants permission and a license to *[congregation/organization]* to reproduce the photographs/images, in whole or in part, in its displays, publications, web pages, or elsewhere and in any form or medium for an unlimited period of time. I hereby waive any right to inspect or approve of the finished product using such images, and I understand that the photographs/images will not be returned to me. I affirm that the photographs/images attached are original on my part and that I am the sole owner/copyright holder of the material, and that neither the materials nor the permission granted hereby infringe upon the rights of any others.

Name (printed, signed, dated) and Address
Name (printed, signed, dated) of parent/legal guardian

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Much has been adapted or informed by the Connecticut Conference's "Internet Safety Guidelines:" http://www.ctucc.org/internetsafetyguidelines. These guidelines also include recommendations for digital covenants and online publishing/posting.

The Southern CA-Nevada Conference has created some excellent resources for social media boundary training for authorized ministers. Those resources are not online, but the Conference has generously shared them with all who have requested them. Contact the staff at: www.scncucc.org.

The Insurance Board has a SafeConduct™ Policy and Procedure Template: http://www.insuranceboard.org/safety_solutions/safe_conduct_workbench.aspx (click "Policy Template"). Pages 54-57 in particular provide helpful guidance for congregational policies and codes of conduct for social media.

Church Law and Tax Report has a five-part series on communication policies for youth ministry programs: http://www.churchlawandtax.com/blog/2014/april/does-your-youth-ministry-have-communication-policy.html (see all the links to the 5-part series).

Adam Cleaveland, "Pastoral Transitions in the Age of Social Media": https://alban.org/archive/pastoral-transitions-in-the-age-of-social-media/

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